

The Ethics of Self Realization:
A Radical Subjectivism, Bounded by Realism

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by

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Abstract: In this paper I will present my metaethical theory that even though morality is socially dependent (relativism) there are still universal principles (realism). Morality is socially dependent in the fact that rights and wrongs do not exist outside of a moral framework, but morality gains universality due to an inevitable value creation that is tied to self-consciousness and will be valued in any society. This value is self-realization. Self-consciousness is driven towards itself and desires to know itself, and although the particulars of any moral framework cannot strictly be said to be moral or immoral, a framework that does not allow the self to self-realize is universally immoral.

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Morality is essentially normative claims about right and wrong actions. These normative actions are the actions that we *must* choose, and if we do not choose them we are making the *wrong* choice. Ultimately the thing that we must choose is ourselves because self-consciousness desires itself.¹ However, when we choose ourselves we must keep in mind that we are historical beings who only exist in relation to our context, our community. Who we are is created by societies and we only exist in relation to societies, so these normative claims must be a result of social construction. The nature of self-consciousness, however, means that every value construction will always value the ability to desire oneself, and desiring oneself can be said to be self-realization, which is the ability to align one's actions with one's life goals and interests. When a particular moral framework systematically denies individuals within the framework the ability to self-realization, that system contradicts itself and is open to external critique. If it contradicts itself, it means that the society *systematically* creates individuals who cannot live up to their own moral standards, thus isolating particular individuals (in almost all cases groups of individuals) from the one value that must be valued, self-realization. I will begin this paper by explaining my understanding of moral frameworks and how it relates to communities and self-consciousness.

¹ Sebastian Ostritsch, *Ethics* (Unpublished Work: 2014) 9.

Right and wrong always exist within a framework. Basically, given any goal of an individual, there is a good and bad way to achieve it. If I wanted to get downtown in five minutes, I could either drive or run. Since it is literally impossible for me get to downtown in five minutes on foot, it is the wrong course of action. I am not living up to my own goals, or values. More or less, something is “wrong” or “right” given the individual’s goals. According to my goal and my values I must drive instead of run. Moral claims are rights and wrongs in respect to human interaction. So given my values I *must* take action B over action A toward another person.

After discussing morality in terms of an individual’s goals and values it looks as if I am heading towards moral subjectivism, a view in which each individual creates her own moral system and the rightness and wrongness of an action are completely up to that individual. Although in a sense subjectivism is correct, I do not believe that an individual can ever exist wholly as an other, or as a divorced entity from the influence of a community. Individuals come from community, and only exist in relation to a community. I am now going to discuss my notion of self-consciousness to illuminate the relation between the individual and the community. I will then arrive at the conclusion that self-consciousness must desire itself. I will explain these concepts by using a Hegelian historical account of the formation of societies and self-consciousness.

Why Self-Consciousness must Desire Itself

According to Hegel’s account, humans created society to “gratify their own interests; but something more is thereby accomplished, which is latent in the action though not present in their consciousness and not included in their design.”² Through this natural progress from society to culture, self-consciousness wills towards self-realization, which is the ability to know oneself

² G.W.F. Hegel. In *Reason in History*, trans. Robert S. Hartman (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1953.): 35.

and pursue one's goals. For example, self-realization which can be achieved through knowledge of the self, is attempted through cultural media such as art and literature. Art and literature come from the self, but are then put up to an audience and allowed to be judged and interpreted.

Through this communication the artist or writer gets a better understanding of herself and grows as an individual. This growth only takes place in relation to the other, or other individual self-consciousness. Hegel says that this process of knowing oneself better by comparing one self to an other is a form of "negation."³ This means that there is no "I" without the "we," because the individual can only know itself if it knows an other that it can compare itself with. The individual is interdependent upon the collective. Society does not exist without individuals and likewise there is no individual without society. Hegel says that,

"In the sphere of Life, which is the object of Desire, negation is present either in an other, viz in Desire, or as a determinateness opposed to another indifferent form, or as the inorganic universal nature of Life. But this universal independent nature in which negation is present as absolute negation, is the genus as such, or the genus as self-consciousness. Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness."⁴

Hegel believed that in order for an individual to know herself she must be able to know how she is different from another individual. If I am a craftsman then I cannot know that I am an excellent craftsman unless I can compare myself to other craftsmen. Similarly, I cannot know myself as an individual self-consciousness unless I compare myself to another self-consciousness. An individual's understanding and desire toward herself cannot be actualized without the other, because only in recognition of the other can there be a reflection of the self, or at the very least the complex robust self-reflection that we experience. In a very real sense, who we are is dependent upon our community. This is not to say that there are not significant biological influences on who we are, but that the biology is just part of what informs social construction.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford University Press, 1977): 110.

Self-consciousness and the social construction of self-consciousness are connected to morality because moral actions are the actions that we *must* choose, and if we do not choose them we are making the *wrong* choice. I will now show that the thing that we must choose is ourselves because self-consciousness desires itself.

Self-consciousness is “a consciousness *of* consciousness.”⁵ This means that to be self-conscious a being to be aware of its own awareness. Anytime a being is able to deliberate about what it thinks, it is self-conscious. For example, if a person is enjoying a book and then later thinks to herself, “why did I enjoy that book?” she is using her self-consciousness.

According to Hegel, “Self-consciousness, first of all, wills itself in general and, secondly, wills itself in every particular.”⁶ What does it mean for a self-conscious person to will herself? It means that self-consciousness wills towards the knowledge of itself, and towards itself. This willing towards the self simply results from the nature of self-consciousness, which is to be consciousness of oneself in relation to oneself. A person rarely (or possibly never) enjoys something without ever having a thought about why it was enjoyable (knowledge of itself) or about themselves enjoying (willing towards itself). The distinction I make between willing towards itself and willing towards knowledge of itself is this: if someone is enjoying a nice meal and she is simply aware of the fact that she is experiencing enjoyment then that is willing towards the self, which is done almost constantly. Willing towards the knowledge of itself would happen when a person enjoying a meal were to think about why the meal was enjoyable. Perhaps it was a particular flavoring, or it simply could be that the meal reminds her of home. This aspect of self-consciousness, to always analyze and look towards oneself, is also exemplified by common questions of “who am I?” and “what am I here for?” But this willing of itself leads to a

⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford University Press, 1977): xvi.

⁶ G.W.F. Hegel. In *Reason in History*, trans. Robert S. Hartman (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1953.): 33.

puzzling circumstance about self-consciousness. For something to will itself it has to want to know itself, but one cannot will or want something when she does not have knowledge of that thing. There must be some aspect of a thing that is known, or thought to be known in order for a person to want that thing. Self-consciousness knows, at the very least, that itself is thinking; self-consciousness has knowledge of itself. But, to will something also implies not having that thing. Consequently, for a self-consciousness to will itself, there must be a part of itself that it does not have or know. This means that a self-consciousness knows that it exists, but also cannot fully grasp its own self. Many human beings desire to know the truth of the question “who am I,” but often fail in the task of self-realization and have false knowledge about themselves. How can a thing desire to know itself and be itself, and have false knowledge about itself? Hegel’s answers this with his notion of the vanishing consciousness.

The [mere] *being* of what is merely ‘meant’, the *singleness* and the *universality* opposed to it of perception, as also the *empty inner being* of the Understanding, these are no longer essences, but are moments of self-consciousness, i.e. abstractions or distinctions which at the same time have no reality *for* consciousness itself, and are purely vanishing essences. Thus it seems that only the principal moment itself has been lost, viz. the *simple self-subsistent existence* for consciousness.”⁷

The content of consciousness is made up of vanishing moments and each time a new moment, or perspective becomes part of someone’s mental contents there is something different about the consciousness. When I say “I,” referring to myself, now or say “I” five minutes from now, the two things that have been identified as “I” appear different. My two selves are not only separated by time but also by the fact that they are not exactly identical. Two things that hold different qualities cannot be the same things. If my future person has a memory or a way of perceiving that my past person does not have, then my past person is different than my future person. This change means that a person will never come to full fruition (self-actualize), due to the constant complexity and changing of the mind. However, the nature of self-consciousness is

⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford University Press, 1977): 105.

being conscious of oneself, and a person will always desire to fully realize herself even though she is in a constant flux and can never fully know herself. The nature of self-consciousness is to desire itself, but a being is constantly in flux and vanishing. As a result, self-consciousness can never fully know itself; contents of self-consciousness are always vanishing, which is why self-consciousness will never fully understand itself. Self-consciousness will always be striving for knowledge of itself.

Mental contents come from society and when self-consciousness desires and chooses itself, it must choose what has been socially created. For example, if I want to be a great poet, then intellectual aspirations seem to be good and worth pursuit. The idea of being a poet does nothing, it comes from social influences such as cultures sub-cultures. Even if I were raised among people who only valued sports, my wanting to be a poet still has to have come from somewhere. This level of social influence means that choosing oneself and one's conception of the good is tied to choosing a good that is only good because of social influences.

The Universal Moral Principle of Self-Realization

I want to argue that despite these values being socially created, the one value that will appear in every culture and every moral framework is self-realization. The ability to desire oneself and self-realize will always be valued in every society. I am not arguing that every person in every moral framework will act in such a way that shows that self-realization is valued, nor am I arguing that everyone will admit to valuing self-realization. I am arguing that because we all have self-consciousness that we will inherently value the ability to choose ourselves and act in a way that brings us closer to our goals. Being able to choose oneself is self-realization. Any being that has goals and wants to achieve those goals values the ability to be able to achieve her goals. This means that each person, regardless of moral framework, values the ability to

achieve her goals , which means she values self-realization. Self-realization is recognized as a good.

Self-consciousness desires itself and wills towards itself, but because there is no “I” without the “we,” self-consciousness only knows itself by virtues of a relation with another self-consciousness. Hegel says that “[A]ccording to the Notion of recognition [self-certainty] is possible only when each is for the other what the other is for it.”⁸

“The attitude [self-consciousness] assigns to both cannot therefore be one of mutual indifference, i.e. it cannot itself be indifferent towards the Unchangeable; rather, it is itself directly both of them, and the relation of the two is for it a relation of essential being to the unessential, so that this latter has to be set aside; but since for it both [self-consciousnesses] are equally essential and contradictory, it is merely the contradictory movement in which one opposite does not come to rest in *its* opposite, but in it only produces itself afresh as an opposite.”⁹

If self-consciousness cannot fully develop without another then it is within the nature of self-consciousness to relate to other self-consciousnesses. The more relations a self-consciousness has, the better the self-consciousness can know itself by negation and get closer to its inherent goal of self-realization. Remember that negation is knowing something by knowing what it is not. The more relations I have with other self-consciousnesses the more I can know how I am uniquely different, but this also allows me to know how I am the same as the other. Again, self-realization is the ability to align one’s actions with one’s conceptions of what is good. Self-consciousness wants to realize itself, but it can only realize itself when it recognizes and relates to another. If one self-consciousness relates to another then it is able to understand that the other also values self-realization. Through successful relation there is empathy, which leads to the valuing of self-realization for all. If I attempt to only value my own self-realization I fail to successfully relate, and therefore I fail to realize myself through negation. I would conceive of myself as wholly an other and live with an inconsistent world view. In other words, I

⁸ Ibid., 113.

⁹ Ibid., 127.

would be wrong *by my own standards*. Even though right and wrong only hold true in relation to a moral framework and the individual, the systematic denial of self-realization will *always* be wrong because, within the formation of moral values, self-consciousness inherently values the ability to self-realize. Historic examples of this moral obligation can be seen in the classic sayings of Delphi's "Know thy self" or in the Confucian quote "There is no greater delight than to be conscious of sincerity on self-examination,"¹⁰ or the Christian, "Do unto others."

Any moral system that attempts to perpetuate arbitrary power dynamics will not allow some individuals or groups to self-realize, because self-realization is wholly dependent upon what kinds of individuals a society creates. If the same society that is creating individuals who want to self-realize in a particular fashion, but does not allow them to self-realize, then the system fails to be coherent and seemingly disallows self-realization. So even though moral systems are created in frameworks, when a system contradicts itself it is open to external critique.

To try to express this idea more clearly, we must realize that self-consciousness will always desire itself. However, the contents of self-consciousness are actually created by one's culture or subculture, so it will value those things that those cultures value. In other words, self-consciousness will desire to be what society, or sub-cultures within society, has said is good. It can *never* be the case that those in a society will value having something done to them against their will. Since it will always be the will of individuals to will themselves, any normative practices generated by a society will value the ability to will towards oneself or the ability to allow others to pursue their notion of the good.

¹⁰ Mencius. "The Works of Mencius :: Book 7, Part 1." Nothingistic <http://nothingistic.org/library/> (accessed March 21, 2014).

This is *not* to say that societies are incapable of denying self-realization for some people. I am only arguing that self-consciousness will always find self-realization as a good and when they deny others the ability to self-realize they contradict their own values. To deny others the ability to self-realize and pursue what they find to be good, is a product of an incoherent moral system. Societies that marginalize and oppress the many or the few do so, in order that others can live better, have more, and *self-realize*. As long as those in power (or those who are creating and maintaining the moral framework) value the ability to realize one's potential, or the ability to pursue one's own notion of the good, and then deny others the ability to do the same, they are acting wrong *by their own standards* each time they marginalize and oppress others. A social value that *systematically denies self-realization*, or in a word, oppresses, can never be coherent. When those in a society act in a way that oppresses others and causes them to not be able to act in the way that society says is good, then the moral framework contradicts itself and must choose to either get rid of the values that cause oppression, or stop valuing self-realization, which as I have said above, is impossible.

Even though I believe that we must value self-realization, in doing philosophy I must entertain the possibility to think of a society that does not hold this value. In a society that does not value self-realization, those who rule (or those who greatly influence the creating and maintaining of moral structures), do not have desires of their own or goals in which they wish to pursue. To this thought experiment, I would say that if this is truly the case and self-consciousness (beings with self-consciousness) does not have to desire to self-realization, then I would have to concede that within this society or framework self-realization is not to be valued, but this society does not exist. My theory only holds so far as self-conscious beings want to self-realize. If they hypothetically did not then self-realization would not be a moral principle. My

theory holds to a type of relativist metaethic where normative moral claims must be created. My moral theory does not have “universal” values in the strictest sense, because it is dependent upon what will be valued by self-consciousness, not what is valuable eternally. However, I am trying to explain how self-realization can be a value that is valued by all real societies of self-conscious beings. Because my theory has a value that applies to existing self-conscious beings, I hold to my use of the word “universal” because, due to the nature of self-consciousness to desire itself, I do not believe that it can be the case that a moral framework does not value self-realization.

In conclusion, this understanding of moral systems allows for there to be a large variety of moral rights. This view, however, also makes it so that there are universal wrongs. What I mean by this is that there are certain practices that inherently disallow self-realization. For example, any culture that finds arbitrary class/race/gender power dynamics acceptable can never be a society that is consistent with *its own value of* self-realization. Since moral values are socially created, the individuals within a society must be able to will towards moral obligations as an act of choosing oneself, we must choose ourselves. There cannot be a communal self-perpetuated desire of having something done against one’s will, so the value of self-realization becomes universal in the fact that it must be valued.